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Ferdinand Ulrich's Reception of Thomas Aquinas' Metaphysics of Being

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Ferdinand Ulrich (b. 1931), a now retired Professor of Philosophy at the University of Regensburg in Bavaria (Germany), is a relatively unknown thinker. Wrongly so! Ulrich, so it seems to me, sheds light on many giants of philosophy and is able to integrate their thought into his own speculative view. Ulrich profoundly influenced the likes of, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar to the point that some Balthasarian insights, especially those pertaining to a so-called Trinitarian distance between the Father and the Son on the Cross, are not easily understood apart from the context of Ulrich's deeply Christian philosophy. However, due to the speculative style and nature of Ulrich's writings his thought is not easily accessible or even citable, not to speak of translating his writings into other languages than German.¹ At the heart of Ulrich's philosophy lies the relation between the giver and the gift, which Ulrich contemplates deeply, especially in relation to Aquinas' metaphysics. Ulrich always upholds the paradoxical simultaneity of the unity between giver and gift as well as the differentiation of giver and gift. Ulrich's point is that the giver remains within his gift as the gift is differentiated from him by being given to the receiver and the

¹For a short overview of Ulrich's thought see M. Bieler's introduction in FERDINAND ULRICH, *Homo Abyssus. Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage*, ed. by MARTIN BIELER/FLORIAN PITSCHL, with an intro. by MARTIN BIELER (Sammlung Horizonte. Neue Folge 30), Einsiedeln ²1998, XIII-LIV. Extracts of Ulrich's texts have been translated in the journal *Communio, International Catholic Review*. David. C. Schindler, one of the main editors of this journal, is working on translating Ulrich's *Homo Abyssus*.

divide of giver and gift is to be seen in the context of the ever deeper unity between the giver and the gift. Separation of giver and gift and presence of the giver within the gift are to be understood as integral aspects of the same process of self-communication.

Aquinas is arguably Ulrich's main source of inspiration. Ulrich is able to point out the anthropological as well as Christological dimensions of Aquinas' ontology² in an astonishing lucidity that probes the concrete depth of seemingly abstract metaphysical principles. Providing an exhaustive account of the relation between Aquinas and Ulrich is clearly unfeasible here, so we have to limit ourselves to hint at Ulrich's interpretation of Aquinas' thought on *esse commune*, which Ulrich presents in his main work, *Homo Abyssus*.³ Furthermore, following Ulrich's speculative account step-by-step cannot be the goal of this paper. Ulrich's speculative trains of thought are very difficult to reproduce, as every thought of his is part of a larger and whole account that cannot be isolated from its parts. Quoting him is thus hardly viable, as every part presupposes the whole account. Rather, we point out some of Ulrich's important insights, without exhausting all the developments Ulrich connects therewith. The only way of truly engaging with his thought is undertaking the risk to read his writings directly.

1 God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* and His Relation to *Esse Commune*

No doubt one of the most puzzling topics in Aquinas' thought is the question of how Aquinas conceives of the relationship between created and uncreated being (*esse*). On the one hand, God is *ipsum esse subsistens*, on the other hand, *esse commune* is complete (*completum*) and simple (*et simplex*) for all created beings, but not subsistent (*sed non subsistens*).⁴ God transcends *esse commune* and is not to be identified with it. Fran O'Rourke showed in his book on the influence of

²See ULRICH, *Homo Abyssus*, 1.

³Ulrich's Habilitation at the University of Salzburg 1958, first published 1961

⁴De pot 1,1

Ps-Dionysius on Aquinas, that Aquinas took the idea of *esse commune* as *esse intensivum* from Ps-Dionysius.⁵ O'Rourke describes this *esse* as the treasure of all the riches in creation.⁶ In the sense of *esse commune* as the actuality of all acts⁷ and the perfection of all perfections, *esse commune* comprehends in itself the wealth of all created acts of being and perfections. As such, *esse commune* is the most perfect of all of God's created effects. Paradoxically, this perfection does not subsist in itself as such: *esse commune* is non-subsistent. Rather, *esse* is that through which something is,⁸ whereas God is being itself and subsists per se.

Ulrich leads the reader deep into this paradox of *esse commune* and draws a wealth of conclusions from the unity of what he calls wealth and poverty in *esse commune*.⁹ According to Ulrich, we best understand this *esse* as a gift of God, in which he himself is present, but which is nevertheless different from him as gift. The wealth of being rests on the presence of God within it, whereas the poverty or nothingness of *esse*'s non-subsistence points to the fact of its totally having been handed over to the thing which participates in being and where being receives subsistence. *Esse commune* is thus subsistent only within a concrete being.

For Ulrich, the paradox of being can only be reconciled through a dynamic view of *esse commune* as a pure mediation between God and the world. Ulrich calls this dynamic or "pull" (Zug) *esse*'s motion towards subsistence and towards concrete finitude.¹⁰ In this way, the positivity of creation is expressed with admirable insight: Through *esse*, God gives a share of his own immense plenitude, but he gives it in such a way that it is always already given over to concrete subsistence in a concrete being. This marks the difference of Aquinas' metaphysics over against what he called the "Platonic Philosophers", who claim that there are subsistent intermediate entities or hypostases which me-

⁵See FRAN O'ROURKE, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 32), Notre Dame, IN 2005, 181.

⁶See *ibid.*, 178.

⁷De pot 7,2, ad 9: *actualitas omnium actuum*

⁸See O'ROURKE, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 151.

⁹Ulrich speaks also of *esse* as a unity of being and nothingness. See ULRICH, *Homo Abyssus*, 26-46.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 26-56. Ulrich calls this motion "Verendlichungsbewegung".

diate existence or perfections to concrete beings. For Ulrich, claiming that *esse commune* is subsistent in any way, even though this would seem only a minor ontological detail, actually jeopardizes the entire positivity of creation and its creator as such. Any attempt at equipping *esse commune* with a subsistence of its own so as to fashion it into an intermediate entity between God and concrete beings, which would possess, as it were, a mind of its own, overshadows the goodness of God and his gift. This goodness is safeguarded by *esse*'s being a unity of wealth and poverty, all and nothing. A certain simple-mindedness is necessary in order to simply affirm *esse*'s given-ness, that lets God's love for his creation shine through.

For Ulrich, failing to account for *esse*'s dynamic and paradoxical character leads to problematic ontologies (e. g. materialism, nihilism). These ontologies Ulrich can analyze in detail and judge other thinker's metaphysical accounts of creation. Without going into details, any perceived lack of given-ness of the gift of being leads the intellectual created substance, i. e. the human being, to conceive of being not as a similitude of God's goodness, as Aquinas would have it. Rather, the supposed lack of goodness of being leads the human person to the necessity to impart *esse commune* with a goodness it lacks in the first instance and to make happen the givenness of being by forcing the gift of being to be given, as it were. For Ulrich, metaphysical thinking is tempted to administer and govern the ontological difference between *esse* and *ens* or *esse* and essence on its own. Resistance towards this temptation is necessary in order to keep the goodness of being in sight. Only through the non-subsistence of *esse* is the unique causality of God the Creator safeguarded. Ulrich considers three aspects of *esse* that together express its paradoxical, dynamic character: Reality, ideality and goodness ("Bonität").¹¹ As soon as these aspects are separated from each other and any one of them is absolutized, the gift of being as love is lost out of sight.

With the relation between giver and gift in the background, in *Homo Abyssus* Ulrich can keep together the paradoxical aspects of *esse commune* and interpret Aquinas' doctrine of the transcendentals and his epistemology in the first quaestio of *De veritate* along the lines of the dynamic "motion" of *esse* towards

¹¹ULRICH, *Homo Abyssus*, 98-168; 249-251.

finitude.

2 Epistemology in the Context of the Metaphysics of Being

For Ulrich, the human soul is the very place where the dynamic of being is “re-produced” or “carried out”, as it were. The self-realization of the human person takes its root in *esse*. The human person attains his own perfection and full actuality only through obeying the “necessary (unavoidable) meaning of being”.¹² In that sense, thinking is a drama just as the human existence is, in that it can obey or refuse the loving dynamic of creation. Just as *esse* the human soul is, according to Aristotle and Aquinas, in a sense everything. However, this only means that the human soul has the potential to become everything it encounters and is thus opened up potentially towards all created beings, without, however, actually knowing anything without encountering it through his or her senses as a concrete and finite being.¹³ This potential openness towards all and the simultaneous need to encounter a concrete and finite *ens* in order to know anything at all mirrors the wealth and poverty of *esse commune*.

Just as the light that shines out from a sun into the emptiness of space never becomes light and remains dark, unless it reaches a concrete planet that reflects its splendor, so the human intellect’s light never becomes actual knowledge, unless in the encounter with concrete beings. The intellect does not simply possess and dispose of his first and self-evident principles within a sphere of ideality antecedent to any concrete act of intellection. Rather, only in an encounter with a concrete being do the principles of intellection (such as the principle of non-contradiction) “become” evident, as it were.¹⁴ This does not mean, however, that these principles of intellection are subjective, but rather that the insight into the principles does not happen apart from an encounter with a concrete being through sensory experience and concrete actualization of

¹²ULRICH, *Homo Abyssus*, 61-95).

¹³*Ibid.*, 250f.; 290-297.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 248-51.

these principles. Any attempt to lay claim to the principles of intellection and the soul's openness to all things beforehand in a sort of vacuum, as it were, is for Ulrich a sign of a profound misunderstanding of the absolute necessity of *esse's* primordial motion towards finitude. Affirming the exinanitio of *esse* is the essential core of the human person's life.¹⁵ In this way, Ulrich is able to hold together the two foundational aspects of Epistemology: A priori and a posteriori.

Ulrich's strength is his speculative ability to situate Aquinas' epistemology in the wider context of a metaphysics of being. *Esse's* motion towards finitude and subsistence, which God enacts, is the foundational structure of the cosmos itself and the human person is the very heart and inner sense of the cosmos.¹⁶ For example, Ulrich explains Aquinas' epistemological differentiation between the simple apprehension of a thing and the judgement upon it as integral steps of the process of intellection against the background of the human being's imitation of *esse's* movement towards finitude.

Absolutizing the simple apprehension of the essence of a being as the only operation of the intellect constitutes for Ulrich a refusal of the corporeality of the human person, as the essence is always already subsisting in a concrete physical being. An essence that has been isolated from *esse's* movement towards finite, concrete and bodily subsistence negates the goodness of *esse* as a gift and casts a shadow over the self-display of the essence in physical reality. In other words: It's not clear anymore that a substance displays and actualizes itself through its accidents, if the human intellect is oriented simply towards a pure essence that it can directly comprehend, without having to consult the senses.¹⁷ In fact, for Ulrich, the very quality of created *esse's* nothingness, which comes to the fore in its non-subsistence in itself, is the condition for the possibility that the immaterial can appear within matter, the material. Thus Ulrich responds to the age-old question addressed to Christianity by many philosophers, how God can be seen in Christ, who is material.¹⁸

¹⁵ULRICH, *Homo Abyssus*, 293.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 304f.

¹⁸See e. g. ORIGENES, *Contra Celsum* I-IV, in: *Origenes Werke. Band 1*, ed. by PAUL KOETSCHAU (*Die griechisch-christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* 2), Leipzig 1899, I,48 (97,19-100,11). Origen talks about the spiritual senses here. For this topic see PAUL L. GAVRILYUK/SARAH COAKLEY (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses. Perceiving God in Western Christi-*

A corollary of absolutizing the operation of the simple apprehension is the identification of mind/spirit with self-awareness in an Hegelian fashion.¹⁹ The concrete embodiment of the spirit is then only accidental and exterior to the existence of the human being. Ulrich argues that this purely spiritual and unembodied concept of the human person roots in the assumption that created *esse* holds on to itself and hovers in the sphere of ideality. This assumption Ulrich diagnoses with the refusal to let *esse* be emptied out primordially towards the concrete existence of corporeal beings.²⁰

For Aquinas, the full meaning of truth is epistemologically speaking only realized in the second operation of the intellect, the judgement, which consists in assigning or separating, affirming or negating features of the object of intellection. Actively saying “yes” or “no” is an essential part of human intellection and mirrors for Ulrich the “resoluteness” with which the gift of being is given into concrete subsistence. Only by this judgement can the human being comprehend being (*esse*), as he puts himself and his existence at stake in the judgement and verdict over what is and what is not. Thereby the human being imitates the “decidedness” of *esse*, which is always already handed over by God to beings in order to award them with subsistence.²¹ Ulrich interprets here the pre-socratic rule that “like is only comprehended by like” as meaning that only by committing in a similar way to beings as God is committed to them (as is visible through *esse*’s non-subsistence) can the human person conceive of being as love.

The two operations of the intellect correspond to a being’s essence and *esse*.²² In the process of intellection man thus imitates, as it were, the ontological constitution of a being out of essence and *esse*. In this sense, man recreates the world within himself, so as to become a microcosm.²³ Knowledge and love are thus intimately related, as through love man can say ever deeper yes to what he has come to know through the intellect and realize it.²⁴ What is more, through

anity, Cambridge 2012.

¹⁹ULRICH, *Homo Abyssus*, 318.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 315.

²¹*Ibid.*, 306f.

²²*Ibid.*, 307.

²³*Ibid.*, 309-313.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 311.

love the human person discovers the deepest meaning of creation, which he or she cannot discover unless by imitating the love that forms the background of creation itself.

3 The Kenotic Background of Creation and Corporeality

Matter or corporeality in its positivity is to be understood as a sign of God's commitment to creation through created *esse*, which has always already surrendered any trace of self-subsistence.²⁵ Considering matter, Ulrich can already sense a certain Christological background within creation. In Christ the goodness of God, which is hidden, as it were, or veiled in the "kenosis" of *esse*, reveals itself ever deeper as the concrete self-gift. Ulrich succeeds to show the deep relation between his view of creation and Christ's saving work. Just as Christ is the utmost sign of God's love in the world, so matter is the utmost ontological sign of the goodness of creation, which is enacted through the givenness of *esse* to beings.²⁶

Ulrich can show that matter or corporeality bear within themselves the mark of the soul's interiority, as they are fundamentally related to each other.²⁷ Ulrich's view is ontologically open to a sacramental understanding of matter — as an expression and the very location of the presence of the intellectual or divine within what seems most distant from it: Corporeality. Through Ulrich's understanding of creation he can show the reason why and how the human being can be him- or herself within the material dimension, without ever losing sight of the soul. The dynamic of human existence bears the kenotic dimension of being (*esse*) by being primordially relinquished into corporeality, in which the human being comes to actualize his essence. By holding together the aspects of ideality and reality within the horizon of the goodness of being as gift is it possible for Ulrich to catch sight of the intellectual/spiritual as the very

²⁵ULRICH, *Homo Abyssus*, 320.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 324-334; at 333 Ulrich even speaks of a "Theology of Matter".

²⁷*Ibid.*, 366.

interiority of corporeality (reality). However, the intellectual is not simply to be identified with the material, but remains different and transcendent (ideality). At the same time, the human soul is always already poured out into the body due to the dynamic of kenotic and self-communicating goodness of being. Thus the human being as soul remains himself and obeys the dynamic of his own creation by affirming the fact of having been handed over to the material dimension of the body. The aspect of goodness forms the middle between immanent transcendence and transcendent immanence.²⁸

By considering deeply Aquinas' ontology by means of a creative concept of the "Verendlichungsbewegung" of created *esse* Ulrich points to deep implications of the analogy of being and explicates the very foundations for the revelation of God within creation.²⁹ Ulrich's philosophical interpretation of Aquinas opens up avenues to mediate aporetic discussions between evolution theory and creationism as well as "materialist-reductionist" brain research and apodictic defense of the human soul. Ulrich's thought therefore bears many treasures, still to be discovered in theological and philosophical research.

²⁸ULRICH, *Homo Abyssus*, 385.

²⁹For this cf. MARTIN BIELER, *Analogue Entis* as an Expression of Love according to Ferdinand Ulrich, in: *The Analogy of Being*, ed. by THOMAS JOSEPH WHITE, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge 2011, pp. 314–337.